

Asmodeus: A Less Than Minor Character in the Book of Tobit

A Narrative-Critical Study

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1. Introduction

The study of minor characters in the scriptures can be a challenge. Names such as Zipporah (Exod 2:16-22), Orpah (Ru 1:4-14), and Job's wife (Job 2:9; 19:17) come to mind. However, the study of such characters enriches our understanding of the meaning and message of biblical texts. One recent work in this regard is Gina Hens-Piazza's study of the cannibal mothers in 2Kgs 6:24-33. She writes, "Nested in the larger structure of the books of Kings, the tale these women tell is difficult. At first glance it courts revulsion."¹ Yet a closer reading reveals that these women force the reader to address violence in the course of salvation history and in our own lives. Who are those devoured by war, poverty, and non-identity? On minor characters in general, Hens-Piazza observes, "Still, we have learned that minor characters who make us uncomfortable, who are different, or who seem less like ourselves are just as valuable for study, and sometimes more valuable than the major characters with whom we more readily identify."²

Recent methods in the literary criticism of biblical texts, including narrative criticism, have enriched the interpretation of biblical texts. Narrative criticism pays attention to the final form and unity of the text. The canonical text is worth studying in its own right because that form contains literary artistry and theological insight. Narrative patterns such as conflict, contrast, reversal, comparison, and causation deserve attention. Narrative techniques such as repetition, irony, paradox, pre

1 Hens-Piazza, Nameless 21.

2 Hens-Piazza, Nameless 21-22. See also Simon, Minor Characters.

paration, chiasm, and *inclusio* also inform our understanding.³ At times a certain theme or motif can be useful to understanding characters and events as the story unfolds. I utilize some narrative-critical methods in this study. My aim is to offer the reader a fuller understanding of the characterization of Asmodeus in the Book of Tobit, as well as how the demon's presence informs the message of the book.

2. Asmodeus

The belief in and literary use of angels and demons in the Greco-Roman world impacted on Jewish and Christian writings. I Enoch, Jubilees, The Genesis Apocryphon, the New Testament gospels, and the Mishnah represent the breadth of such influence. Although demons are largely discussed in general in the literature, proper names emerge. Lilith, the legendary first wife of Adam and killer of newborns, comes closest to Asmodeus in terms of violence to marriage and family.

Many studies of Asmodeus are diachronic, looking at the origins of the name, as well as demonology in the intertestamental period and later Jewish folklore. More synchronic investigations largely write of the demon in passing, noting its role in Sarah's plight and later its banishment to Egypt.⁴ Outside of the book of Tobit, Asmodeus appears most prominently in the Testament of Solomon (5:1-13). In this pseudepigraphon the archangel Michael gives Solomon a ring that grants him power over the demons. In Solomon's encounter with Asmodeus he learns that the demon is the offspring of an angel and a human mother. Astrologically depicted as the Great Bear, Asmodeus foments wickedness, murders newlyweds, and drives women mad.⁵ Indeed, there is more to Asmodeus than what appears in the book of Tobit. In extrabiblical art and literature he becomes a wild demon of lust, and even a magician.

Asmodeus is certainly *the* minor character in the Book of Tobit and seems quite "flat" at first glance. The demon is largely spoken about and acted against. His only explicit action is fleeing to Egypt and there bound by the angel Raphael (8:3). Their struggle reflects the develop-

3 See Powell, Criticism; see also Alter, Art; Bar-Efrat, Art.

4 See Grey, Meaning 790-792; Deselaers, Buch 89; Soll, Asmodeus 116, on meanings and occurrences of the name. See Lange et al., Dämonen 239-421, on demons in the Persian and Hellenistic periods. On the depiction of Asmodeus in later art and folklore, see Voelkle, Morgan Manuscript, 106-107. In Christian morality Asmodeus becomes the demon of lust, one of the Seven Deadly Sins.

5 See Duling, Testament 935.

ment of angels vs. demons in the intertestamental period.⁶ Only the companion dog gets less attention than he! Asmodeus' depiction in the book is enigmatic and contradictory. Despite the fact that he purportedly loves Sarah, he slays all her new husbands (6:15)! His characterization bespeaks, "If I can't have her no one will." Although a minor character in the overall story, Asmodeus has a major impact on the character Sarah.

In addition to the demon, Sarah is also the object of derision from her maidservants: "You are the one who kills your husbands! Look, you have already been given to seven husbands, but you have borne the name of not one of them" (3:8; cf. Gen 16:4-6).⁷ Such verbal abuse from subordinates helps explain her thoughts of suicide, a theme uncommon in the scriptures.⁸ Aware that God is the one who bestows the blessing of fertility (Gen 1:27-28; 20:17-18; 30:2; 1Sam 1:6), Sarah says nothing back to her servants. She turns quickly to God in prayer.

How then can one interpret the role of Asmodeus beyond his being the "flat" minor character that basically occasions the rescue of Sarah from her plight and highlights Raphael and Tobiah as his nemeses? Attention to some patterns and techniques in the narrative offer clues to a richer understanding of the demon. The minor character must be understood in relation to the major characters and what happens to them as the story unfolds. A particular theme or motif can inform the understanding of a minor character. Harking back to Hens-Piazza's remark cited above, Asmodeus can prove to be "valuable" to the book of Tobit.

2.1 Asmodeus in the Narrative Context

The three scenes that mention Asmodeus (3:7-17; 6:2-18; 8:1-21; cf. 12:18) offer grist for narrative interpretation.⁹ To begin, Sarah's di-

6 See Schüngel-Straumann, Tobit 92-93.

7 Quotations are taken from Fitzmyer, Tobit, wherein he includes attention to the Semitic texts from Qumran. See his comments on p. 89. For the ancient texts I refer to the critical editions of Hanhart, Tobit; Weeks, Book.

8 See Deselaers, Buch 89. Suicide occurs only seven times in the Hebrew Scriptures (Judg 9:54; 16:30; 1Sam 31:4 and 5; 2Sam 17:23; 1Kgs 16:18; cf. Judas in the NT, Matt 27:5; Acts 1:18). See Droge, Suicide 225-31, and Boadt, Suicide 966-968, on the subject.

9 The proper name Asmodeus occurs only twice in G^L II (3:8, 17), the scene of Sarah's prayer and petition.

The impersonal designation of demon is more common (G^I 3:8, 17; 6:8, 15, 16, 18; 8:3 and G^{II} 3:8, 17; 6:8, 14, 16, 18; 8:3). The sparse reference to the proper name calls to mind the Pharaohs of the book of Exodus. They remain nameless, while the mid-

lemma in Ecbatana parallels that of Tobit in Nineveh (3:1-6).¹⁰ Her innocent suffering calls to mind the book of Job.¹¹ Like Job she shows the willingness to argue with God. Unlike Tobit, her prayer raises an option other than death: "If it is not pleasing to you to take my life, O Lord, then listen to the criticism of me" (3:15). In sum, Sarah begs God just to do *something*, whether granting her death or offering a merciful answer to her prayer.¹² In the end (3:16-17) the prayers of Tobit and Anna will be answered, in part, via the agency of the angel Raphael. He will be sent to facilitate Tobit's regained sight and Sarah's wish for a husband. The angel unites two families in marriage and gives reason for the praises of God sung by Raguel and Tobit (8:15-17; 11:14-15; 13:1-18).

Second, Asmodeus is cited during the journey to Media. At a rest stop along the Tigris River a fish bites Tobiah's foot. Raphael tells him to conserve its gall, heart, and liver for future use.¹³ Later on the journey the significance of these parts for exorcism is revealed (6:8, 14). Therein the theme of love for Sarah recurs threefold: her father (6:12), the demon Asmodeus (6:15), and Tobiah (6:18).¹⁴ When read together in the canonical book, a triangle of love emerges in the narrative. The warm human love of Raguel and Tobiah contrasts with the oxymoronic cruel love of Asmodeus. The idea of dysfunctional love comes to mind in the modern reader. Although verbs of love are used (*ἀγαπάω* or *φιλέω* in G^I and G^{II}), Asmodeus arguably demonstrates selfish lust. He must be banished for two families to be united and genuine love attained.¹⁵ Tobiah is the one destined for Sarah: "You are next of kin to her, and beyond all other men you have the right to inherit what comes

wives of the Hebrews are remembered as Shiphrah and Puah (Exod 1:15). Such omissions suggest a dismissive attitude toward negative characters.

- 10 Tobit and Sarah are temporally and spiritually together in prayer (3:7). See Griffin, *Theology*.
- 11 Despite some affinities to the more progressive theology of retribution in Job, the overall Deuteronomistic theology in Tobit is apparent, that is, suffering is a test of fidelity and ends rewarded. But like Job the young girl Sarah takes her stand and presses her case; she is no shrinking violet who sits passively and awaits vindication via the conservative tradition of divine retribution. On Deuteronomistic theology see Di Lella, *Background; and Theology*.
- 12 See Di Lella, *Prayers* 107-113, for a detailed study of Sarah's prayer.
- 13 See Kollmann, *Offenbarung* 292-293, on the socio-cultural background of such magic.
- 14 The demon's love is unevenly witnessed in the ancient versions. Fitzmyer's translation, which I am using, brings together the three references to love in Tobit 6. On the textual variants see Fitzmyer, *Tobit* 212, 215, 220-221, as well as Moore, *Tobit* 196-197.
- 15 The modern reader must take into account that love here is not primarily about affection but about marriage and its duties. Hence, Tobiah can profess love before even meeting Sarah. See Dancy, *Tobit* 40.

to her; all that belongs to her father it is your right to inherit" (6:12). Raguel is honorable (6:12, καλός in G^{II}); Asmodeus knows no human virtue and enjoys no marital relations with Sarah.¹⁶ In sharp contrast to such values as endogamy, loyalty, and familial piety, Asmodeus stands in stark contrast.

Third, at the turning point in the story, with Tobiah adamant about marrying Sarah (7:9-11), Asmodeus is finally banished (8:1-21). The showdown, so to speak, seems anticlimactic, comprising only two verses (8:2-3). The apotropaic power of the smoke takes effect immediately and may well bespeak an intended diatribe against empty pagan magic. God is the creator of all and controller of the universe, calling to mind the depiction of heavenly bodies in Gen 1:16-18. These lamps are only "good" when understood in their proper place in the created order. In terms of the theology of creation, Asmodeus bespeaks a return to primordial chaos. On creation in Genesis, Clifford writes:

In the Genesis system the human race is the center of a harmonious universe, spanning and uniting it before God. Because God is not needy like the gods of comparable cosmologies, the Genesis system is designed less immediately to provide essential services for the divine world. God does not make things primarily for the divine world (e.g., marshes as the source of bricks and reeds for the temple, animals for its sacrifices, and human beings to build it), but rather to enable the human race to play its role in the world.¹⁷

Such theology of creation informs the book of Tobit (cf. 3:2, 11; 8:6; 13:11). Urbrock deems the book an "Earth story":

"... the book of Tobit exhibits a strong sense of kinship or interconnectedness between Earth, humans, other animals, and angels. Worlds interconnect or interpenetrate in this book, and are balanced. The troublesome demon Asmodeus, who does his mischief among earthlings, has unwitting partners in the birds of the courtyard."¹⁸

The narrative overlooks details such as how Asmodeus got into the bridal chamber or how the newlyweds were able to stand the smoky stench. More efficacious is the prayer that ensues (8:5-7). Therein Tobiah and Sarah reecho praise of the mercy and blessings that come from God. Tobiah's acceptance and love for his bride is explicit; she is his

16 Ego, Er 309-317; Textual Variants 371-378, takes Asmodeus to be a jealous and love-sick demon from whom Sarah must get a "divorce" of sorts in order to be freed. Though intriguing, I find the conclusions unconvincing. More simply, Raphael comes to release (ἀπολύσαι) cataracts from Tobit's eyes and loose (λύσαι) the demon from Sarah (3:17). Cf. 3:6, 13. In 10:12 Raguel sends off (ἀπέλυσεν) Tobiah and Sarah. The meaning and emphasis are on healing and marriage, not divorce from a demon.

17 Clifford, Creation 144.

18 Urbrock, Angels 137.

sister (ἀδελφή, 8:4).¹⁹ The new father-in-law Raguel soon enjoins his best wishes: "Show them mercy and deliverance, Master, and bring their lives to term with happiness and mercy" (8:17).

2.2 The Bed Motif

The characterization of Asmodeus emerges in the comparison and contrast with other personages in the book. But narrative criticism also looks at themes and motifs that inform biblical stories.²⁰ I now turn to a selected motif in the book of Tobit that informs our understanding of characters, including Asmodeus.²¹

The motif of the "bed" (and bedroom by extension) informs the story. To begin, besides the bed as a euphemism for sexual union (Gen 49:4; 1 Chr 5:1), Hammett well summarizes the semantic range of the bed motif:

The bed was used not only as a place of rest, but also as a place one went to await death (Gen 48:2; 49:33). It was thus used as a figurative expression for death (Job 17:13; Ps. 139:8). The righteous meditate (Ps 4:4 [MT 5]; 63:6 [7]) and sing to God (Ps. 149:5) on beds, while the wicked plot wickedness on their beds (Ps. 36: 4[5]). The sluggard stays lazy in bed (Prov 26:14), while he should be up doing nobler things (Ps 132:3).²²

Some of these meaning apply to the story at hand: sexual union, wickedness and death, and meditation/prayer in the bedroom or on the bed.²³

The first mention of the bed motif occurs in Tob 7. Edna prepares the marriage bedroom (ταμίειον, 7:15-16; cf. 8:1, 4). It is noteworthy that *both* of Sarah's parents are responsible for this action: "Edna went and

19 Moore, Tobit 237, notes that "sister", as a term of endearment, can refer to a bride; see Cant 4:9, 10, 12. The loyalty, and perhaps affection, expressed here harks back to the beginning of the book. Tobit has ever been charitable toward his relatives (1:3, τοῖς ἀδελφοῖς), and now his son demonstrates such values toward Sarah.

20 On theme and motif I follow the distinction used by Alter, Art 95. A theme is an idea in the narrative (love, hate, remembering), while a motif is a concrete image or sensory quality (fire, water, the staff of Moses). Distinct from a *Leitwort* (the abundant repetition of a word or word root), a motif may be symbolic and more inferred from the narrative context.

21 See MacDonald, Food 165-176, for a study of the motifs of food and drink in the Old Testament. In the book of Tobit he sees in these motifs a humorous connection between death, sex, and food.

22 Hammett, Bed 159.

23 Though not explicit, one may infer the bed motif in Tobit 2-3. Tobit sleeps next to the wall of the courtyard and is blinded (2:9); soon he utters what may be called a "deathbed" prayer (3:1-6).

made the bed in the bedroom, *as he had told her*" (7:16). The reader should appreciate the pathos and the tension at work in this scene. A feast and a potential funeral are juxtaposed in the moment. Under the superficial air of celebration at the "rehearsal dinner" lurks anxiety and fear. Which of Raguel's statements will prove right: "I have already given her to seven kinsmen, and all of them died on the night they were to be with her ... (and you're next Tobiah)" or "... the Lord will act for you both" (7:11)?²⁴ Although the reader knows the final outcome, one must appreciate the inner life of the characters as well.²⁵

On several levels comic irony is evident in the scene. Tobit asks for death (3:1-33). Now Tobiah, at least in the mind of Raguel's family, may well be asking for death should he marry Sarah.²⁶ Raguel reassures his future son-in-law and toasts to his happiness, but Raguel still digs a grave just in case (8:9-10). Confident of his imminent death, Tobit arranges for his son's future security (4:1-4); less than confident of the impending marriage, Raguel arranges for Tobiah's burial. Finally, the insecurity of Raguel sharply contrasts with the self-assuredness of Tobiah: "I shall not eat here or drink anything until you settle what pertains to me" (7:11).²⁷ Tobiah is aware of matters unknown to Raguel and his family (instructions from the angel Raphael, the repellant fish parts), but the two men's first encounter seems an odd reversal of roles in "meeting the in-laws." One might expect the future father-in-law to be confident and diligently sizing up future son-in-law. One might expect the future in-law to be nervous and awkward.²⁸

In this scene Asmodeus is absent but implied. He has already been the sevenfold agent of death, and without him this crisis in the story would not exist. The theme of endogamy would simply be highlighted as Sarah is destined for Tobiah (3:17). Indeed, family is the key theme in

24 The experiences of the two mothers evoke pathos as well. While Edna prepares the dangerous marriage bed, Anna habitually watches the road by which her son left (11:5). Their motherly care and anxious concern for their children reflects God's care for people (8:17).

25 Fitzmyer, Tobit 34, notes the story lacks a plot in the strict sense of the word. It lacks building suspense and a climax for the already in-the-know reader. However, the reader can still enter into the experience of the characters and sense their emotions at any given point.

26 See McCracken, Narration. He writes of Sarah: "Losing one husband on the wedding night is sad business, while losing seven is almost inevitably comic" (417).

27 Nickelsburg, Tobit 799, notes that Tobiah's pressing of a business matter before the meal is a breach of etiquette.

28 Di Lella, Prayers 108, makes a similar point about Tobit's and Sarah's prayers for death: "The reader perhaps would have expected Sarah to shed tears and carry on, and the older Tobit to be in control of his emotions."

the chapter.²⁹ Tobiah respects endogamy in line with his father's own example (1:9) and already has his heart set on Sarah. Raguel rejoices in his kinship with Tobit (7:5-6), and has not lost hope of a lasting marriage for his sole daughter. Asmodeus stands in stark contrast to and isolation from all the other characters. He is not a human being and behaves in an inhuman manner (compare Gen 6:1-4). His presence lurking in the background adds pathos and contrast to the characterization of the book. Family bespeaks a consistent investment in others, a part of the characterization of the families of Tobit and Raguel. Tobiah's intentions with Sarah are rooted in sincerity (ἀλήθεια), not motivated by lust (πορνεία, 8:7). Sincerity and truth mean especially keeping the commandments.³⁰ Asmodeus' so-called love is essentially lust in disguise.

The bed motif continues into chapter 8, reaching its high point and the reversal of misfortunes for the families about to be united in marriage. In the first several verses the bed motif recurs. They all want to go to bed (8:1, lit. κοιμηθῆναι, "to fall sleep"), but first Raguel and Edna take Tobiah and Sarah to the marriage room (ταμίειον) for their wedding night.³¹ Tobiah acts with dispatch to counter the demon, using the fish parts conserved at the advice of the angel Raphael. The apotropaic effect occurs immediately. No struggle ensues. Asmodeus simply flees to Egypt and is bound by Raphael. With equal dispatch Tobiah calls his bride to prayer on their marriage bed (8:4, ἀπὸ τῆς κλίνης). On the bed the couple blesses God in an extended prayer that includes petition. It is ironic that the ongoing anxiety about the demon (3:8; 6:8, 15; 7:11) now banishes so quickly. He who had killed seven husbands is brought down by the smelly innards of a dead fish!

This scene draws Asmodeus directly into the story, and his characterization informs the meaning and message of what unfolds. The demon that had killed seven husbands is now banished at the very scene of his deeds, that is, the marriage bed. There is no struggle in the exorcism as one might expect in face of a demon. No longer does Sarah have her deathbed. In the broader context of the story Tobit and Sarah ironically share "deathbeds" (chap. 3) but hers is the real tragedy. Tobit's metaphorical deathbed is Sarah's stark reality sevenfold. Tobit's incident is accidental (bird droppings); Sarah's plight is malicious (As-

29 See Moore, Tobit 224.

30 See Rabenau, Studien 142.

31 Zimmermann, Book 91-93, suggests reading v.4a after v.1, thus harmonizing the actions of Sarah's parents.

modeus). Both fates are absurd but both victims will enjoy a reversal of misfortune which bespeaks a move from death to life.³²

Central to this scene is the theme of prayer that eclipses the problem of Asmodeus. Tob 8:1-3 deals with the demon, while 8:4-8 narrates the prayer of Tobiah and Sarah and 8:9-21 a successful marital union and the joint prayer of two families united. Henceforth, Asmodeus is just a by-word: "He [*Raphael*] cured my wife ..." (12:3).³³ The guardian angel gets the credit in the end. Raphael instructs Tobiah on their journey, and Tobiah returns the favor by giving the angel much recognition in the end.

One more detail in the scene deserves comment, that is, Raguel's digging of a grave in anticipation of Tobiah's possible death. Raguel's motivation stems not only from past circumstance but also from the perspective of honor: "Lest he [Tobiah] die and we become a laughing-stock and object of ridicule" (8:10).³⁴ This verse, read together with "Then he bade his servants fill up the grave before dawn would come" (8:18), suggests that Raguel is looking at broader implications should Tobiah die. What will others think of his family in light of this embarrassment? His worry proves unwarranted as Tobiah and Sarah arise the next day from their wedding night. One could say that Raguel's concern about honor and shame ends up being Asmodeus' fate. The demon himself ends up a laughing-stock and object of ridicule. Despite the reputation of demons in folklore, he ends up bound in a faraway place never to haunt Sarah again.

Finally, the bed motif occurs once more at the death of Tobit: "So they laid Tobit on his bed and he died" (ἐπὶ τῆς κλίνης, 14:11). In the end the "deathbeds" of Tobit and Sarah take another ironic twist. In the beginning the "deathbed" was Tobit's fantasy but Sarah's reality. In the end the deathbed becomes Tobit's reality and the close of the story. His wish for death early in the story was full of bitterness because of an absurd accident (bird droppings in the eyes). In the end his actual death is dignified: "He was buried there with due honor" (14:11). Earlier Raguel was anxious about dishonor by the untimely death of To-

32 Nowell, Book 201-205, discusses death and life as the basic opposition in the book. A number of nouns and verbs signifying death (to die, kill, murder, strangle, destroy/perish) occur through the narrative and stand in opposition to verbs of release. Cf. note 15 above.

33 Fitzmyer, Tobit 297, notes the angel Raphael's acknowledgement of God's primary hand in the happy ending: "Raphael seeks to get Tobit and his son to understand that God's gracious initiative was the source of his mission and of the effects of it, the cure of Tobit's blindness and the freeing of Sarah from Asmodeus' influence."

34 On the social value of honor see Gilmore, Honor.

biah (8:10); now Tobiah's father dies with honor. Overcoming the hold of the demon Asmodeus was essential to the happy ending.

No longer preoccupied with past problems, the deathbed speech of Tobit turns to what lies ahead. Future tenses punctuate his final discourse. Hence, there is an apocalyptic flavor of his words.³⁵ In God's time the Jews will return from their captivity and rebuild Jerusalem with splendor, just as the prophets of Israel had foretold (14:5).

In sum, the bed motif informs the reader's understanding. Asmodeus somehow lurks wherever the motif arises, whether in the background or present. The bed serves as a nexus for encounters with God and others. As a motif the bed bespeaks the persons, places, and events that make up the Tobit story: birth and death; love and heart-break; encounters with others for good or bad, for moments or lifetimes. The bed, on it or kneeling at its side, is also a place of prayer. The book of Tobit is worth reading because it speaks to the perennial vagaries of life.

3. Narrative Criticism and Theology

Narrative and related criticisms offer a lens for understanding minor characters in the scriptures, here Asmodeus. The demon is more than the sum of diachronic sketches or light attention in synchronic studies. Greater attention to his place vis-à-vis other characters commends itself. Likewise, motifs can inform the reader's understanding of the narrative, as does the bed motif here.

If Asmodeus can be identified *with* another character rather than *against* one, it is surely Sennacherib. Both are agents of death, one a spiritual being and the other human. Of the Assyrian king Tobit says, "I also buried anyone Sennacherib had put to death ... In his anger he slew many Israelites, but I would steal their bodies and bury them; when Sennacherib looked for them, he did not find them" (1:18; cf. 2Chr 32:21). To leave the dead unburied and left to the elements was an abomination in ancient Israel (Deut 28:26). The king and the demon show the same character traits. Both lack compassion and kill indiscriminately. Sennacherib is to Tobit's family what Asmodeus is to Raguel's. Tobit has his property confiscated; Sarah loses her newlywed

35 See Fitzmyer, Tobit 324. Cf. 3:16; 8:2-3; 12:12-15; 13:11.

husbands. Hence, from the very beginning of the story a “demonic spirit” already emerges.³⁶

Asmodeus also speaks to the importance of boundaries, a theme discussed above in terms of creation theology. The demon violates marriage boundaries by killing Sarah’s husbands, and the union of a demon with a woman offers no fully human offspring, only anomalies. This and another key boundary violation in the book (the confiscation of Tobit’s property) teach that identity is often more about genealogy than geography.³⁷ Hence, endogamy is a key theme in the book. This family value spoke to the Jewish exiles who first read the book of Tobit. Hermeneutically, it still speaks to the modern reader but in new directions. Multiculturalism and diversity challenge xenophobia. Ecumenism struggles against religious intolerance. Endogamy invites a hermeneutic of suspicion.

Most importantly perhaps, a narrative-critical reading of Asmodeus highlights the *affective* side of family life. The value of personal sacrifice, working out domestic problems, letting adult children go their way, and happy family reunions come to mind. Like the story of Joseph in the book of Genesis and the little book of Ruth, this story is much about real people and their life journeys. Although law (property, marriage, and money) is part of social definition, so also is family custom.³⁸ Emotionally mature people make a consistent investment in the life of others. The primary characters in the book of Tobit show such maturity. Asmodeus’ only affective traits appear to be anger, jealousy, and lust. He thinks only of himself.

4. Conclusion

Minor characters are largely overlooked in the study of biblical narratives and are seen as props to further the plot. Narrative criticism and related literary-critical methods offer a lens through which to study and better understand them. Fresh insights into the theological message of a biblical text are the greatest reward of such efforts.

On the surface Asmodeus seems a shallow character used to explain Sarah’s plight and occasion the reversals in the story: Tobit gets his son and his money back; Sarah gets a husband. Two families with

36 Soll, *Misfortune* 215-216, investigates such evil from the perspective of Vladimir Propp’s studies of the folktale. Propp’s Function 8 relates to villainy/lack (Tob 1:20; 2:10; 3:8).

37 Levine, *Diaspora* 105 and 107.

38 See Soll, *Book* 243.

endogamous roots are united. The angel triumphs; the demon is banished and bound. Families *living* in exile benefit from a demon *sent* into exile. However, the final verdict on the characterization of Asmodeus the demon remains open to refinement. The tendency is to characterize him as an evil spirit, a personification of unbridled anger, jealousy, and lust. That is much *my* reading of the text. Yet Beate Ego raises a characterization of Asmodeus that piques one's curiosity. Her study made me ask myself: "Can a love-sick demon merit at least a little sympathy?" Remember, unrequited love is a great theme in world literature. Though not "Beauty and the Beast" outright, a vitriolic reading of Asmodeus *could* be balanced with some compassion, perhaps. Compassion is a virtue in the book of Tobit. The dead must be buried with dignity, whatever the cost. Almsgiving is a timeless virtue. Husbands and wives argue but stay together. Adult children care for their parents. The bed motif offers a merism of life: from the cradle to the grave, the lot of all creation. However one reads Asmodeus in the book of Tobit, the demon emerges as a less than minor character when examined more closely.

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IV.

